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Virginity Pledges Can't Be Taken on Faith

By [Sandra G. Boodman](#)
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Many abstinence programs have embraced the concept of virginity pledges, encouraging children as young as 9 to promise to wait until marriage to have sex.

So how reliable are reports of sexual activity by teenagers who took such a pledge?

Not very, according to a study by Harvard doctoral candidate Janet Rosenbaum published in the June issue of the American Journal of Public Health. Rosenbaum found that 53 percent of adolescents in a large, federally funded study who said they made a virginity pledge denied doing so a year later, often after they had become sexually active.

At the same time, 10 percent of teenagers who said they had had intercourse and then made a pledge or became born-again Christians subsequently said they were virgins.

Rosenbaum's study is based on an analysis of 1995 and 1996 data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, which involved more than 13,000 teenagers in grades 7 to 12. At the time virginity pledge programs, many of them sponsored by evangelical Christian groups, were proliferating as a way to combat teenage sex, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and perceived moral decay.

Rosenbaum said her study shows that efforts to evaluate such programs' effectiveness is complicated by teenagers' reports of behavior that may be influenced by religious or social

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- 17
 - 16
 - 15

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factors. "Whatever environment you're in, you're more likely to conform," Rosenbaum said.

Sarah Brown, director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, a nonprofit organization headquartered in Washington, agreed. "This study confirms that when people are asked about sensitive behavior, you have to take their answers with a grain of salt."

"What's interesting is that it showed changes over time and tried to tease out what might lead to those changes," she added.

Previous studies have found that teenagers who make pledges contract STDs at nearly the same rate as those who don't, but that they have fewer sexual partners, are less likely to use condoms and more likely to engage in anal or oral sex.

Leslee Uhrh, president of the nonprofit National Abstinence Clearinghouse in Sioux Falls, S.D., called Rosenbaum's study "junk science."

"These programs work," said Uhrh, calling the study a "politically motivated attack" on pledge programs. "We see it all the time. I don't trust this data," she said, noting that the information that Rosenbaum used was collected 10 years ago. "Things have changed."

Denny Pattyn, founder of Silver Ring Thing, an evangelical Christian program that has received federal funding, said that about 60,000 youths have made virginity pledges after attending a three-hour sound and light show sponsored by his Pittsburgh-based group. Participants spend \$15 for a silver ring inscribed with a Biblical verse -- a virginity symbol to be removed on the wearer's wedding day and given to his or her spouse.

"We teach abstinence because it's the truth," said Pattyn. "We don't analyze ourselves based on reducing the risk."

Pattyn said that his program assesses its effectiveness in part by sending e-mails to participants for four months after they take a pledge to ask if they are abstinent.

The group is about to launch a study of its long-term effectiveness, according to researcher Paul Kennedy. Kennedy said an online survey he conducted in March involving 2,500 youths who attended Silver Ring Thing found that 97 percent of attendees reported having an improved understanding of the benefits of abstinence and an awareness that oral sex does not eliminate the risk of contracting an STD.

Like other pledge programs, Silver Ring Thing leaders endorse the concept of "secondary virginity," which means that a teenager who is not a virgin can start fresh by taking an abstinence pledge. That notion, Rosenbaum suggested, might cause some teens to discount previous intercourse as experimentation not worth reporting to researchers, thereby complicating accurate evaluation of pledge programs.

To Columbia University sociology professor Peter S. Bearman, who has published several studies on the effectiveness of virginity pledges, Rosenbaum's findings are not surprising.

"Study after study that's peer-reviewed has showed that these programs make no appreciable impact on public health, and increase dangerous behavior" because pledge-takers are more likely to engage in unprotected sex, Bearman said. "Pledging leads to a form of promise-breaking that's riskier."

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